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The Athanasian Creed

A PLAIN TRACT

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THE ATHANASIAN CREED.

THE Athanasian Creed has attracted a great deal of notice lately. Some persons have wished that it might be done away with ; others that it might be altered ; and others that it might be left out of the public service. It is very desirable that all Christians should understand this Creed as far as possible, especially we Churchmen who have been accustomed to hear it and to join in repeating it for so many years. If we do understand it I think we must either wish it to be continued as it has been till now, or else we must wish to have God's Word altered. The object of this Tract is to make as plain as I can the meaning of the Creed, in the confident hope that a great many persons who may have been disturbed by what they have heard or read against the Creed, may be brought to value it as a great treasure.

It is not of any consequence to determine who is

the author of it, by whom it was written. Nobody in the world thinks that it was written by St. Athanasius himself. It is called after his name because he was so great a sufferer or martyr for the grand Truths which are so distinctly set forth in it. In his time almost all the Church departed from the true faith on the great question of the Divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ. But Athanasius remained firm. In spite of all that was done to him he maintained to the end that Jesus was God, perfect God, One with the Father and the Holy Ghost. So many Christians refused to believe this, and so few continued to hold it, that it became a saying afterwards, "Athanasius against the world." At length God, Who had given Athanasius grace to keep steadfast in this faith, brought others back to him. And after some time this Creed was written and received as expressing the Truth which God has revealed of Himself.

There are three great, solemn, awful Truths, specially and distinctly taught in the Athanasian Creed.

I. What we commonly call the grand doctrine

of the Trinity in Unity, on which all our faith and hope depend; that there are Three Persons, but One God.

II. That our Lord Jesus Christ was perfect God and perfect Man in His One Person.

III. The third great Truth taught is that which really is the most objected to, *viz.* that the belief of these two former Truths is necessary to Salvation; or in plainer and simpler words, that a person cannot be saved, or go to heaven, unless he does really believe these two things. Those who object to this, perhaps believe these doctrines themselves, but they have friends who do not believe them, and they do not like to think that the Church is always warning these friends that if they continue in their unbelief, they cannot attain eternal life. They wish, therefore, either to get rid of these warning words altogether, or to get rid of the hearing them read, and being obliged themselves to read them.

But before we go to speak of these great warning words, it is as well to remind you that in repeating this Creed we do not apply its words to any man or woman whatever. We do not judge or con-

demn any person ; all that we leave to God. We only warn all persons that if they choose to put themselves into such a position, they come into certain danger.

Again, it seems hardly necessary to say what one would think was so evident to all thinking people, only that some seem to have misunderstood, that of course the words of the Creed are not intended to apply to what I may call *impossible* cases, any more than God's own words in His Book. They are not intended to speak of the poor heathen who have not had the opportunity of believing the Truth, because they have never been taught it ; nor of idiots and persons of weak mind who cannot take in and understand what is taught them. The very words of the Creed themselves seem to show this, as we shall see when we come to them. All persons of this kind we leave in God's hands, and we are sure that He who is so Holy, and Just, and True, and Who so delighteth in mercy, will do towards them what is right and kind.

The Creed begins with stating this Third Doc-

trine, and so we will begin with it likewise. The clauses in which this doctrine is stated are called sometimes the Damnatory Clauses, or the Admonitory Clauses, or the Warning Clauses. "Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith.

"Which faith, except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly."

Now there is no doubt that these are very solemn and awful words. But we shall gain nothing by trying to pare them down, and to make them mean something less than they plainly do mean. They say that whoever wishes to be saved must first of all believe. The word "will" means "wishes, desires." As when the leper came to our Lord and said, "Lord, if Thou *wilt*, Thou canst make me clean;" he meant as we should say now-a-days, "If Thou desirest, if Thou dost choose." If a person wishes to be saved, he must begin by believing the Catholic Faith, that is, what all Christians everywhere from the first have believed. It is not enough to believe something

like it, or a part of it, that is not the thing itself. Nor is it believing the Truth to put something to it and believe this. The real Truth itself, neither more nor less, "whole and undefiled," is what we must believe. To give a simple illustration. You tell a child that the fire will burn, therefore he must not touch it nor put anything into it. He cannot be said to believe this, if he knowingly puts his clothes to the fire, and says it will not burn them; or if he puts water on the fire and then expects it to burn as before. What must be believed is what God has taught His Church, and what His Church has always believed, and not something which one man or another may fancy to himself and call by the name of God's Truth.

Is it true that a person *must* believe this, or be lost eternally? The Creed says so positively and distinctly. And so says the Bible just as positively and distinctly. The words of the Creed are just like the words of the Bible. Hear St. John the Baptist, "He that believeth not the Son *shall not see life*, but the wrath of God abideth on him" [S. John iii. 36]. Hear our Blessed Lord to the Jews, "If ye

believe not that I am He, ye shall die in your sins" [S. John viii. 24]. And again of all mankind, just as He was about to ascend into heaven, "He that believeth not shall be damned" [S. Mark xvi. 16]. Hear St. Paul, "The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven . . in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord" [2 Thes. i. 7, 8, 9]. Again, "That they all might be damned who believed not the truth" [2 Thes. ii. 12]. Hear St. John the Apostle of love, who lay on Jesus's breast at supper, "He that hath the Son hath life ; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life." Are not all these words of St. John the Baptist, of our Lord Himself, of St. Paul, and of St. John as precise and distinct as any words can be ? Do they not say plainly and positively that those who do not believe shall perish everlastingly ? Are not their words as damnatory, or admonitory, or warning as the words of the Creed ? and are they not almost the same words, the same words in meaning and

spirit though not precisely in letter? In the Creed the Church does no more than repeat the very words which God has given her for the very purpose that she shall teach and publish them to the whole world.

But persons say "it is uncharitable and unkind to speak in such strong and harsh terms of other people." Remember we are not speaking *of other persons*, but to all men, warning them of certain danger. Is it really unkind or uncharitable to bid our neighbour beware when the danger is so great and so certain? Would it not be very unkind, under a plea or pretence of charity, to let them run into hopeless mischief without warning them? If there is a very dangerous path on the top of a cliff, is it unkind of the owner of the field or the authorities of the place to put up a notice in a conspicuous place, telling everybody that if they go there they will certainly be seriously hurt or killed? And if a man were to see you going on carelessly into that path, and were to come up to you and tell you again and again in strong language of the certain risk you were running, would he be

unkind? Would not the unkind thing be to let persons incur the risk without interfering to save them? If you see your child sucking something which you know is poisonous, which is the kindest thing [to do, to snatch it or strike it out of his hand at the risk of hurting him a good deal, or to deal so gently with him that he has had time to suck in a good deal more of the poison before you stop him? To impute bad motives to other people—to charge them with doing, saying, or meaning bad things which they have not done, or said, or meant—to let them go on undisturbed when you know very well they are sure to get seriously hurt, these things are uncharitable and unkind. But to help to save them from harm by shouting out loud in their ears, and almost forcing them to take notice of their danger, this is an act of Christian kindness and true charity.

Let us now go on to examine what the Creed says about this Catholic Faith, what it is.

I. The Grand Doctrine that there are Three Persons, yet but One God. This of course we cannot understand. But that is no real reason why

we should not *believe* it.* There are many most undoubted truths respecting ourselves and things with which we are most familiar, which we cannot understand. But there they are, we are certain of them, and we depend on them, though it is quite beyond our powers to know why, or how they are. The proof of this from Scripture is very plain. That there is but One God was the beginning of God's teaching by Moses. "Hear, O Israel : the Lord our God is One Lord." [Deut. vi. 4]. "To know Thee, the only true God." [St. John xvii. 3]. "There is none other God but One." [1 Cor. viii. 4]. "One God and Father of all, Who is above all, and through all, and in you all." [Eph. iv. 6].

Yet the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are each called God. "To us there is but One God the Father, of Whom are all things, and we in Him" [1 Cor. viii. 6]. Jesus, the Son, says Himself, "I and my Father are One" [S. John x. 30].

* We believe that there is One God Who has neither beginning nor ending. We cannot *understand* this : but our not understanding it is no reason for our not believing it.

And the same Evangelist had said in the first words of his Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." St. Peter, in rebuking Ananias for his sin, said, "Why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost" [Acts v. 3], and immediately after he adds, "Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God." The Three Persons are spoken of together as of one and the same dignity, power, and position. As in the Form of Baptism, "In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." [St. Matt. xxviii. 19]. And in the Apostolic benediction, "The Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all." [2 Cor. xiii. 14]. A distinction there is between the Three, and yet no superiority of One above the Other. Each is God, and the Three are God : One God in Three Persons.

Some have taught that as there is One Only God, there cannot be Three Persons ; that either the other Two are inferior beings to the First, or they are only varying expressions of the same thing.

So that some have maintained that God the Father died for man. These are people who “confound the Persons,” mix them up together instead of keeping them distinct. Others, again, have said, if there are Three Persons there are Three Gods: these have divided the Substance. The word “Substance” is used to express the One God. The word “Person” denotes the distinction of Father from Son, and from the Holy Ghost.

Whatever is true of God, as God, is true of each one of these Three Persons, otherwise that Person would not be really God. God is “Lord,” God is “Uncreated,” God is “Almighty,” God is “Eternal,” God is “Incomprehensible,” therefore the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, are each of them “Lord, Uncreated, Almighty, Eternal, Incomprehensible.” These different things are what we call qualities, or attributes, which belong to God alone. No man, no created being whatever can be called by any one of these titles. But they every one belong to God: and, if I may so speak, He would not be God if He had not them all. The word “Incomprehensible” is often

misunderstood. It does not mean here that God is beyond our understanding, though that would be true; but it means that God is a Being Who cannot be enclosed within any space however large. Or, as He says Himself, "The heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain Thee." [1 Kings viii. 27]. "Do not I fill heaven and earth?" [Jer. xxiii. 24.] Everything which He has created is placed somewhere, so that being there it is not elsewhere. But God Himself the Creator is everywhere, and has nothing to shut Him off from any place whatsoever.

The Three Persons in the Godhead are all equal in dignity, power, and position. There is no such thing really as greater or less, earlier or later, among them, as though there was ever a time when the Father existed without the Son and the Holy Ghost. We call the Father "the First Person," the Son "the Second Person," and the Holy Ghost "the Third Person." But they are not always mentioned in this order. For example, in the Apostolic benediction, with which we are so familiar, "The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ"

is put before "The love of God." And St. Paul, in Eph. ii. 18, makes a still further transposition. "Through Him," that is God the Son, "we have access by one Spirit," that is God the Holy Ghost, "unto the Father."

Yet the Father, because He is the Father, is the One Fountain or Source of Godhead, which from everlasting the Son derived from Him alone by generation; the Son was Begotten of the Father. And the Holy Ghost by procession—the Holy Ghost "proceedeth from the Father." But yet these Three, being Each One God; are all equal, Each Person the One Same God as the other Persons.

This is the doctrine of the Trinity in Unity. It is simply what God has taught us about Himself. If a person does not believe this he does not believe God. He may believe something about Him, but he does not believe Him, for this is God, and nothing else is God. If, therefore, he must believe in God in order to be saved, he must believe this which we have been setting forth; or if he does not believe it he will find that he cannot be saved.

II. The second great Truth which is set before us here is that our Lord Jesus Christ was both Perfect God and Perfect Man in His One Person. He Whom we have spoken of as "God the Son," "The Second Person" in the Trinity, condescended to enter into the womb of the Virgin Mary, and to come forth from thence as every other child is born. So that He was her child as truly as any of us is the child of his mother, and yet He was Very and Eternal God at the same time. He did not lay aside His Godhead, He did not leave off being God, when He entered her womb: but St. John the Baptist, while himself yet unborn, did leap in Elizabeth's womb out of honour to Christ while He was yet unborn but conceived in the Virgin's womb. He had therefore the substance of God derived from Eternity from the Father, and the substance of man derived in time from His mother Mary; the two substances joined in His One Person; so that He was, and *is*, at all times God and Man in One Christ. And the Church has delighted to call the Virgin Mary "Mother of God," not that she was Mother of His God-

head, but of the Manhood, the human nature, the body of Him Who is her God, and our God.

When He became man He did not change His Godhead into man's nature, so as to be only the very best, purest, wisest, and most exalted of mankind that ever was or could be. This He certainly is, but He is a great deal more : for He is, as He ever was, God. He took man's nature and joined it to His Divine nature, so that while He felt and suffered and died as Man, He was God likewise all the time. He took all things belonging to man, except sin—our reason, our feelings, our infirmities, as well as our bodily flesh ; and retained all the perfections of Godhead, Eternity, Almightyness, Holiness. The two natures of God and Man are joined together in Him, as truly and perfectly as body and soul are joined together in each one of us to make us what we are. So we can see that if we look at Him as Man, He is less than God the Father Who is not Man. But if we look at Him as God He is not less than the Father, He is equal to Him. Thus we can explain those texts of Holy Scripture which

seem to be at variance. "I and My Father are One," One God. "My Father is greater than I," greater than My Manhood. To believe in Jesus Christ is to believe this of Him. Nothing less than this is sufficient, for if we do not believe Him *as He really is*, we do not believe Him at all. "He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life." What is "the Son of God"? Not something which people imagine for themselves, but what God has told us Himself, not a mere man, however great and excellent; that is not "the Son of God." But God made man—the Very and Eternal God become a suffering, dying man, and as God and Man in One Person now appearing in Heaven for us, preparing a place for us, about to return to judge us.

This, and this only is the Catholic Faith, the truth which the whole Church has always believed. People may receive as much or as little of it as they choose; but unless they believe it *all*, they cannot really believe any part of it. They cannot be saved; for our Lord's plain words are "He that

believeth not shall be damned." Turn these words which way you will, there they are ; they will always come back again speaking the plain, naked, but most blessed truth, that unless we believe in One Who is able to save, we must be lost : Blessed Truth, that One is revealed to us on our own level, and so able to feel for us in *all* difficulties ; and on the same level as God, and therefore able to help us out of every difficulty. We may not, and we need not, deceive ourselves by trusting to something which shall disappoint us at last, or by fancying that our Saviour is beyond our reach. Man, He is level with us ; God, He is Almighty : Man, He can be touched with our feelings ; God, He is mighty to save.

Now that we have gone through the Creed step by step, so that I hope you can understand its meaning and its teaching, we come back to the question, "Is it right, and is it kind, to speak of the necessity of believing this in such strong and decisive language?" I think the real answer to this is to ask another question. "Considering how great, great beyond all our powers of comprehen-

sion, is the matter at stake, namely, our everlasting Salvation, would it be right, would it be kind, *not* to warn everyone of the imminent danger which is so close to them?" We have seen that the things which are said to be necessary to be believed are distinctly taught in Holy Scripture as the very Truth of God; and we have also seen that God speaks in Holy Scripture in the same awful, fearful terms, of the necessity of believing, and the danger of not believing. It is therefore the duty of the Church, who is "the pillar and ground of the truth" [1 Tim. iii. 15], to put forward for God's sake His Truth, as He puts it forth Himself. We, instead of wishing anything to be altered respecting this Creed, should try when we read it in Church to enter into the full meaning of the words, and while we condemn no living person as not believing the Truth, we should pray that God will bring all those who are unbelieving or doubtful, to a full, hearty, and sincere faith in Him that they may be saved.





